

Abraham
Lincoln
story

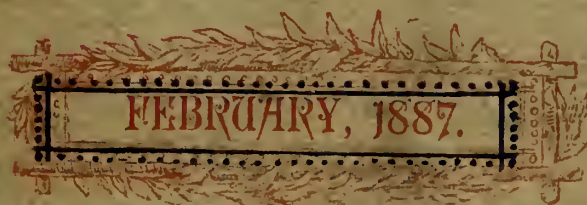
MACMILLAN

OF

AMERICAN HISTORY

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EDITED BY MRS. MARTHA J. LAMB.



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PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S UNLUCKY PASS

The following incident is from the private papers and memoranda of a gentleman high in the Secret Service Department during the late civil war. He had partly written the story for publication prior to his death, thus it is given in his own language. The facts have been carefully compared with official documents, and are found correct in every particular. No publicity was ever given to the affair, it having been kept from the press entirely, and it appears now for the first time in any form save that of an official report. It is believed that outside of Mr. Lincoln, Mr. Stanton, the lady and gentleman mentioned in the article, and the officer from whose notes the account has been obtained, the details of this incident were wholly unknown. For obvious reasons, real names are not given. The two principal actors in the scene are still alive, and history would in no way be benefited by making public matters which might wound their feelings. Late one night in the fall of 1863, the following telegram was received by the provost marshal in the city of Baltimore :

Colonel Fish :

"War Department, Washington, D. C.

Information received at this office renders it almost certain that a lady about sixty years of age, name unknown, visiting her daughter or daughter in law at Syracuse, New York, is preparing to run the blockade with several trunks containing articles contraband of war and otherwise. I hope you may be able to take means to secure this person and her baggage, *no matter under what circumstances she may present herself.*

(Signed)

Edwin M. Stanton."

The wording of the telegram, as will be observed, was peculiar, and the fact that such a telegram should be written at all about an ordinary smuggler was somewhat puzzling. Knowing that our bluff Secretary seldom wasted words on any matter I was forced to the conclusion that there was more in this affair, or, at least, that *he* knew more about it, than he cared to say through a dispatch, and although nothing was ever said by him as to this presumption on my part, yet events which afterwards occurred in working up the matter proved my surmise to have been correct. It was worse than useless, however, to be losing one's self in abstract speculations concerning a matter which required immediate action. Secretary Stanton evidently intended this dispatch both as information and as an order, although the order was not well defined. Syracuse was many miles distant; it was fair to presume, in a place of that size, there might be more than one "lady about sixty years of age, name unknown, visiting her

daughter or daughter-in-law ;" but, would there be more than this one "preparing several trunks?" Here was a faint hope of being able to get some trace, if we only had the proper person or persons there to investigate ; but to send a stranger upon a matter which required such accurate and minute local information would clearly never do. Whether Syracuse had a good police force, and whether its chief was "loyal," was a matter better understood now than then ; knowing they must have a postmaster, and presuming from the fact of his being a government officer that he was loyal and trustworthy, a copy of the telegram was sent to him, with a request that he would take measures to inform me if he could obtain any clew to the person mentioned.

This postmaster proved to be a good officer, and his heart was evidently in the Union cause, for in a very short time he sent back word that such a person had been there visiting her daughter-in-law for some time, and that she had left for New York city the week previous, taking with her three large trunks which he had positive information contained medicines, dry goods and "Yankee notions ;" sorry he did not know this before, and could he be of any further assistance? Of course he could not be expected to do anything further, and it was very uncertain whether any one, at this late hour, would be able to proceed with the case, for the clew, very slight at first, had now become so frail that the chance seemed small indeed of ever finding the lady or her desired trunks. The fact of her having gone to New York was bad enough, but to have it occur "more than a week ago," seemed a climax of the complication. She had had time to escape with her effects, and before this might have been in Nassau, congratulating herself on her success ; still there was a chance that she had been taking matters more leisurely than we supposed, enjoying the good things of New York thoroughly and lingeringly, before voluntarily shutting herself away from them by going into the Southern States. She had taken her own time in Syracuse, might she not do the same in New York?

While no probable chance could be thought of whereby Mr. Kennedy (superintendent of police in New York) could render any assistance in this matter, yet there was a possibility, and it was thought proper to leave no means untried ; therefore a history of the case was prepared and forwarded to him for such action as he might think proper in the premises. A more complete description would have assisted him in the search, but he was given already all we had. "A lady about sixty years of age, with three trunks ; came from Syracuse a week ago, doubtless *via* Hudson River R. R." A small thread indeed to follow in a city of a million inhabitants. Thus the matter stood for at least two weeks, when there came a little ray

of light from New York. A lady who would answer the description had gone to Washington several days back, and she might be in that city at present; still there could be nothing positive about it.

This might, or might not be information; if indeed it was "our lady," we did not believe it possible for her to get through the lines at any point this side of Eastern Tennessee without a pass from this office, unless she should have unusual influence "at court" and manage to obtain a pass directly from Mr. Lincoln, which was a very rare achievement. No flurry was necessary, for, if this had been her intention, she had doubtless perfected her plans so thoroughly before reaching Washington that all had been consummated; or, which seemed more probable, she had failed. In either case, she would be compelled to come to this office herself finally; in the first event to get her pass countersigned ere it would be accepted by the Bay Line steamers, and, in the second, to try for a pass here for herself.

No developments had occurred in this direction for some two weeks after the date of the information mentioned above, as to her (or some one something near the description of her) having left New York. But in the midst of a mass of correspondence one morning, I was interrupted by the orderly who informed me that a lady and gentleman wished to see me as to a pass.

"Why do you let them trouble me with this matter? Show them to the desk of the officer in charge of that business," I said.

"I could not help it, sir. I directed them to Lieutenant Walker, but they insist on seeing you," was the courteous reply.

"Well, show them in, but don't permit this to happen again; people must learn to transact their business with the proper officers," I remarked with some asperity.

The door swung open somewhat impatiently, and there entered a lady past middle age, rather tall and commanding in her appearance, a pleasant but decided cast of features, an unmistakable air of gentility and breeding pervading everything about her, and tastefully and quietly dressed in mourning. She was accompanied by a middle-aged gentleman whom I recognized instantly as one of the most eminent lawyers of the city, a gentleman of wealth and high social standing, but with the reputation of being at heart a sympathizer with the South. These were the visitors who would not be put off, and although the subject had been entirely out of my mind for some days, yet as I rose to receive them it came like an inspiration that this was the lady I had for more than a month been seeking. Presenting chairs, they, especially the lady, were reluctantly seated; she

seemed to think her dignity demanded that she should in no manner accept the hospitalities of the office; but after a short hesitation, catching the eye of her escort, she accepted the proffered seat. Waiting a few seconds for the visitors to make their business known, I asked in what manner they could be served. The lady partially rose as if intending to come toward me to speak earnestly, but her friend with a very slight motion to her to remain seated, said:

"We are sorry to disturb you, and are aware you seldom give personal attention to individual passes, but the circumstances are so peculiar, we have presumed to come to you direct rather than deal with one of your subordinate officers."

A gesture of assent was given, as he seemed to pause for such, and he proceeded:

"The lady who accompanies me is the wife of one of your —, one of the general officers in the Federal Army. She has relatives in the State of Virginia, whom she is anxious to visit, and has obtained a special permit from Mr. Lincoln to do so, but upon presenting herself at the gangway of the steamer last evening and tendering her pass from the President, to her astonishment she was informed it was of no avail without being countersigned by you. Unable to understand why this was necessary and unacquainted with the location of your office, the boat being about ready to start, she was forced to abandon for the time her undertaking, and was driven to a hotel. Having had for many years the honor of her acquaintance, she came to my house and solicited my assistance, if any was needed, in seeing you to have this matter (which we presume is of form only) made straight."

A square, straightforward story, said in few words, and to the point, if we except the little stumble as to the side the general officer was on; and had it not been that the lady was "about sixty," and an unaccountable presentiment that she was the one we had been so long seeking, they would have been immediately furnished with the required pass, and dismissed, but with all these suspicions it could not be done, at least without some questions. Turning toward the lady, I asked:

"Will you allow me to look at your pass?"

She presented it somewhat ostentatiously, almost defiantly. Sure enough, there it was, all perfectly *en regle*; the signature was well known, and besides this, the whole body of the pass was in the unmistakable handwriting of Mr. Lincoln.

"Officers and guards will pass the bearer, Mrs. ——— through the lines via Fortress Monroe, unmolested and her baggage undisturbed.

A. LINCOLN."

Rather a tough document to get over ; if my surmises as to the holder were correct, however, under the circumstances, it was deemed best to shrink from nothing, even to ignoring a document as clear, concise, and of as high authority as this.

Remarking that "this seemed to be all right," she was asked "why she had waited so long before availing herself of the document, its date being some days back?"

She replied that she "had been visiting friends, and knowing it to be good at any time, had been in no haste."

"Have you been North long?"

Madame started abruptly at the question ; straightening herself in her chair, she replied :

"I fail to see how any such questions bear upon our business ; you will excuse me if I decline to answer."

The gentleman, at this point, rose abruptly and somewhat nervously. "Perhaps I can smooth this difficulty," said he, advancing to the desk. "Mrs. — has been for a long time with her daughter in the North, and availing herself of the known and tried loyalty of her gallant husband, has asked for and obtained the safe conduct you see, in order to enable her to visit near and dear friends in less fortunate circumstances."

Turning toward the lady again, who, evidently taking her cue from her friend, had relaxed somewhat in manner, I asked :

"Madame, you will pardon me, but there are a few questions it will be necessary for me to ask. Is your daughter-in-law living in Syracuse?"

"Yes, sir."

"You went from that place about a month since to New-York?"

She bowed.

"About two weeks since you went from there to Washington?" I continued.

"Yes, sir ; I did. But of what interest I pray can the recital of all this possibly be to you?"

"Excuse me, madame, but one more question. Where is your baggage at this time?"

"You are becoming impertinent, sir," said she, rising. "My trunks are at Barnum's, where I took rooms last evening ; and I decline to answer any further questions."

This conversation had all been conducted so quietly and respectfully, that it was doubtless the most distant thing from the minds of either the lady or gentleman that there was any possible doubt of the ultimate success of their undertaking ; indeed, how *could* it be otherwise ? Were they

not armed with the protection of the highest authority in the United States? This being the fact, what had they to fear? It was their province to give orders, not to obey; true, some little official routine must be conformed with, but in face of the document held, all *must* bend to their will.

Touching a bell, the orderly making his appearance was directed to inform Lieutenant Morris to report immediately. As the lieutenant came into the room and saluted in his quiet, impassive manner, the smothered anxiety or curiosity of both the lady and gentleman, which had begun to manifest itself from the moment I had sent for the officer of the guard, could be no longer contained; both started to their feet impatiently, angrily.

"What is the meaning of this remarkable conduct?" said the gentleman, vehemently. "Am I to understand, sir, that you are about to dare to controvert the orders of the President of the United States?"

"Remain perfectly quiet, sir, if you please. It simply and positively means that I am about to place this lady in arrest, as you will see. Lieutenant, you will take charge of madame. Conduct her to her hotel; see that she needs nothing to make her comfortable in her own rooms, where it will be necessary for her to remain until further orders, and in the meantime she is to hold no conversation with any person without a special permit from these headquarters."

The poor old lady sank back in her chair as white as death. "What?—what, sir?" she gasped; "arrest? arrest me?"

The lieutenant, obeying an almost imperceptible gesture, took two or three steps toward where she sat. The gentleman, who had apparently been stunned and bewildered by this sudden turn of affairs, now recovered, and in truly manly style came to the rescue. Stepping out as if to intercept the officer, his voice trembling with suppressed excitement, he turned toward where I was standing, exclaiming:

"How dare you, sir? Are you insane? Do you know who she is? Your power, I well know, is considerable, indeed too much—but there *is* a limit. You shall not do this thing. She is here under the protection of the chief magistrate of the nation, her husband one of the most gallant officers in your army" (the "your" came out squarely this time, his indignation having made him forget his guard), "and she shall not be insulted and outraged by you, a subordinate, who, because clothed in a little brief authority, seem to consider yourself infallible, and unaccountable to any one for your actions." Turning again to the officer, he said: "Touch her at your peril."

The lieutenant looked inquiringly, then, evidently satisfied there was to be no change in his orders, respectfully requested the lady to accompany him. She rallied from the startled and frightened condition into which she had been thrown, and as he addressed her she rose to her feet with dignity and a certain stately manner which well became her, saying with emphasis:

"I will make no scene; I will go with you, but dearly shall that man," pointing toward me, "suffer for this indignity."

"One moment, lieutenant," I remarked. "Madame, we shall be compelled to trouble you for your keys."

"Never," she broke in impetuously, "never shall you have them unless taken by force. Is there then *no* limit to your insolence?"

"Madame, it is imperative, and it will be so ordered that your three trunks be brought to this office. Should you refuse us the keys, we shall be compelled to break the locks. This we dislike to do, but should we have to do so, you must not after this positive assurance blame us for so doing. This whole affair is to be regretted, but under all the circumstances, and in the face of previous orders, I see no alternative. It is fully understood what liabilities are being incurred, and we do not shrink from the responsibility. If there is any one you particularly desire to send for, inform your friend and your wishes in that respect shall be obeyed."

She haughtily drew herself up, as she replied: "My friend," with somewhat scornful imitation of manner, "is abundantly able to take the proper steps to punish this insult, without any suggestions from you. As for myself, I can cheerfully endure a short imprisonment for the sake of the satisfaction I shall certainly soon feel in seeing you justly punished for this high-handed misdemeanor." Without a tremor, with a stately bow to her companion, she waved the officer in front of her and marched after him out of the room, erect and dignified. Her friend closed the door and turned back, saying:

"That I am astounded at your presumption, and shocked at your want of feeling, I need not say. But, sir, that is not all; I shall take the next train to Washington, and lose no time in laying your extraordinary behavior before the authorities you have insulted and outraged. You may expect to hear from me again in a very few hours, and unless I am more mistaken than ever in my life, your present quiet and cool demeanor will be changed more than you will care to have it."

Assuring him of my perfect willingness that he should take the course he proposed—nay, more, that it was impossible to see how he could honorably in friendship to the lady take any other—he was also informed that

everything had been done upon mature reflection, and that there was no desire to shrink from any responsibility incurred through what seemed to him an arbitrary and unjust course. He went away with every indication of being highly incensed, and a positive prospect of a coming retribution upon the head of the man who had wrought this unforeseen disturbance.

Within a very short time the three trunks arrived, *with the keys*. Upon opening them, it was apparent the postmaster was correct as to their contents. If any further evidence had been needed as to the expediency of seizing them, they would have furnished it themselves, and had Mr. Lincoln known what he had been cajoled into passing unmolested over his signature, he would without doubt have been excessively displeased at those who had, wittingly or unwittingly, assisted in the deception so successfully attempted. The same evening our friend, who had so energetically made a raid upon Washington, returned. Entering the room with a brisk, satisfied step he presented me with an important "I told you so" air, a document bearing the impress of the War Department and addressed in the bold, nervous handwriting of Mr. Stanton.

"It is as I expected, sir," said he, as he laid it upon the desk, "and I have good reason to believe when you have read that letter that you will most heartily regret the steps you have taken in this matter." Opening the envelope there was found, what it was natural to expect from the information they had at Washington, viz.: a peremptory order from the Secretary of War "to immediately release the lady from arrest, restore her baggage, furnish her with a pass, and show cause why you should not be dismissed the service for disobedience of orders."

Short, curt, and to the point. Just such a document as any one knowing our irascible Secretary would expect. Our friend watched closely while the communication he had delivered was being read, evidently expecting to see a marked change of countenance.

"This is precisely what was expected," I said, laying the open letter on the desk; "he could not well have written anything different, knowing what he does, as yet, of this affair."

"Well, sir," exclaimed my visitor, "you do not pretend to say you refuse to obey that direct order? I was astonished at your audacity before, but *this* is inconceivable. May I ask, sir," mockingly, "*who* is the real conservator of power at the present time in these unhappy United States? My old foggy notions had always led me to believe the Secretary of War superior to any subordinate, and that deliberate, willful disobedience of orders was a crime to be most severely dealt with; but it seems I

am mistaken, or else not educated up to the *advanced* age. May I ask what you *do* intend to do in this matter?"

"Certainly," I replied blandly. "It is proposed to immediately answer this letter by telegraph, stating what action has been taken; also to make a written report, in which reasons will be set forth why the course has been taken which evidently seems so unaccountable to you. Upon receipt of answer to this proposed report, it will be possible to give you information as to probable final action in the case. Until that time things must remain precisely as they now stand."

"I trust that I shall yet see you humbled in this matter. Shall I be allowed to see Mrs. — and provide for her comfort? Or does it suit your convenience to render her as unhappy as possible?"

"You can see madame, if you desire it. But as far as personal comforts are concerned, she has the best a first-class hotel can afford, and is restricted in nothing but permission to leave her apartments, and intercourse with the outside world except through this office. She also has female attendance from the servants in the house. Very many people in this city would be most happy to be similarly situated, as far as necessities, or even luxuries, are concerned."

Accepting a permit to visit his friend, the gentleman went away, evidently discouraged. The support he had so strongly leaned upon had as yet proved of no avail, although it was apparent he was far from believing but that all would yet be reversed, as was natural from his stand-point of view. Yet the quiet composure and confidence in which all that had seemed so extraordinary to him had been done, had shaken him quite considerably in this belief. As soon as he was gone a telegram was sent to Mr. Stanton, stating that, notwithstanding his last and peremptory order it had been thought proper to stay the execution of it until he could be put in possession of further and complete information as to the case, which there were strong reasons for believing would cause him to revoke the order and approve of the action taken at this office, and that a full report should be sent next mail. Such report was prepared, giving the case in detail; first quoting his telegram of a month back, and emphasizing the sentence, "I hope you will be able to take such measures as to secure this person and her baggage, *no matter under what circumstances she may present herself*"—and then giving each step in the prosecution and development up to the present time, finally assuring him this was the person spoken of, and inclosing an inventory of the contents of the trunks.

The next morning's mail brought an autograph letter from him, most

heartily approving the course taken, and leaving the whole case for the final and usual disposition in such matters, further stating that the matter had been laid before Mr. Lincoln and that this letter was written with his consent and approval. Some regrets were also expressed that no intimation had been previously received from this office as to the nature and bearings of the case, which would have prevented the summary tone of his previous communication brought by the gentleman interested.

In a very short time the gentleman in question entered, evidently a wiser and a sadder man. It was apparent he had been to Washington again, faithful to his trust, determined to leave no means untried to assist his friend. Mr. Stanton's letter was silently handed to him; he read it carefully and remarked sorrowfully that, "it was past his comprehension. That when subordinate officers presumed to dictate to their superiors, and were upheld in it, it boded no good to the country," etc.

To his inquiry as to "whether it was decided yet what the final disposition alluded to was," he was informed that the lady should have her own personal effects; to wit, her clothing actually made up, or cut and not made, and other things of like nature, returned to her, and be passed through the lines under guard whether she desired to go or not, with charge not to return during the war. Also that if she would designate some one of her relatives in the North to whom she wished the other things which were in her trunks delivered to, that should also be done, although such was not the usual course.

These promises were fulfilled, and she departed the next day. The articles not permitted for her to take were delivered elsewhere according to her directions, and thus ended this singular affair. Some time afterwards, the matter came up casually in conversation with the President, and he remarked that, he "was glad on some accounts that it had occurred, for it gave him an excuse ever after, when urged to grant a similar pass, to quote this case, and truly say that it might be of no avail, for his pass sometimes proved of no account except to be the means of getting himself into trouble, and he preferred to leave such business entirely to the officers who were expected to regulate and govern such matters."

Allen Forman